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No. 238

A MAKER OF MEN

A Duologue in One Act

BY

ALFRED SUTRO

Author of "The Walls of Jericho," "A Marriage has been Arranged,"
"Mollentrave on Women," etc., etc.

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A MAKER OF MEN.

SCENE—A little sitting-room in a small house in a far-away street in West Hampstead. It is evening; the lamps are lit and the curtains drawn. The furniture is very simple, its most prominent feature being a cottage piano, which fills a corner; but everything in it, from the chairs upwards, is good of its kind, carefully chosen, and blends harmoniously with its neighbour. The books on the shelves, the wall-paper on which hang good photographs of Rembrandt, da Vinci, and Velasquez, the flowers on the table and mantelpiece, the few bits of old china, brass and pewter, combine to invest the little room with a pleasant atmosphere of refinement and culture.

CUTHBERT FARRINGDON and **EDITH**, his wife, are its only occupants. He is a man of forty-two, of medium height, with an eager intellectual face. **EDITH** is ten years younger, a deep-chested woman, with a magnificent figure. Her face is strikingly handsome; the large grey eyes are sunk rather deep, and the extraordinarily long lashes almost throw a veil across them. Her dress, cut a little low at the neck, and with sleeves bare to the elbow, is exceedingly simple, but of excellent taste and design. **EDITH** is sewing, seated in an arm chair by the table, c.; **CUTHBERT**, up R.C., crosses to L., paces the room nervously.

CUTH. Only nine! (*moves to L.*) How the minutes crawl! It seems hours since dinner. (*sits L. of table.*) Surely the post is late to-night? (*goes up into window L.C.*)

EDITH. (*is sitting c.*) No, dear, the hour's just striking. A quarter-past is the usual time. Are you sure you'll hear to-day?

CUTH. Maxwell promised—and he's a man of his word. (*up L.C.*) "As soon as the directors rise," he said, "I'll pencil you a note." A good fellow, Maxwell; he'll do what he can for me, I know.

EDITH. Well, in about ten minutes—

CUTH. Yes; we shall know our fate. (*comes to back of arm-chair c.*) Oh, this means such a lot to me!

EDITH. (gently) Cuthbert—

CUTH. (comes c.) You think me too sanguine, of course, and all that. But every man in the office is certain that I shall be chosen. Maxwell himself told me that there wasn't much doubt. And, remember, this is the last branch the bank will open, for years. They've been going ahead too fast as it is. It's my last chance. (to her c.) But what a chance! Here am I, at forty-two, getting three hundred a year. As manager at Croydon I shall have six hundred, and any amount of possibilities. And such a house! Edie, you'll love it. (sitting on arm of chair c.)

EDITH. We've been very happy here.

CUTH. Oh, yes, but poor—grindingly poor. We've had to weigh every penny. Now we shall be able to afford a stall in the theatre once in a way—cabs—a little supper at a restaurant. We've been such mice, so far! And it means another servant for you, and less drudgery. Oh, I tell you, (rise and c.) I ask nothing more in life. I'll say, like Malvolio, "Jove, I thank thee!" (to window up L.c.) Isn't it strange that postman doesn't come?

EDITH. Don't be so excited, dearest. Mr. Maxwell may have forgotten.

CUTH. He never forgets; he's the soul of punctuality and order. Oh, no, he has written. The letter's in the post-man's bag. Heaven, to think of it! (comes down L. and takes paper off c. table) I'll make that Croydon branch a success, I can tell you. I've got the stuff in me.

EDITH. Don't build on it too much, dear Cuthbert. You don't know what the directors may do.

CUTH. (sitting L. of table c.) They may pass me over, of course, but I don't think it likely. There's only one other man in the running—Pegwell. (turns up) And Pegwell's my junior by three years. He's a smart chap, but he's my junior, and the directors are very conservative. It's pretty long odds on me. Oh, if it doesn't come off—if it doesn't—don't be afraid, Edie. (rises, down L.) I'll bear it like a man.

EDITH. I'm sure of that, Cuthbert.

CUTH. (to L. of EDITH back of table, sitting on table) I really don't care for myself; it's for you that I want it—for you. We've been married nine years—and a poor time you've had of it! You, the prettiest of the three sisters—and see how the others have married!

EDITH. (smiling) Do you think I am dissatisfied?

CUTH. (is sitting on EDITH's L.) Ah, with your maid-of-all-work, and the three children upon your hands the

whole of the day, you must often and often have wished—oh, never mind that now! It's over—I know that it's over! Six hundred a year; and a house—that's equal to seven hundred and twenty. And there are big opportunities; as the bank prospers the manager prospers with it. (*taking work and putting it behind him*) Ah, Edie, no more sitting up late in the night sewing and darning, and having to make your own dresses!

EDITH. That's not a hardship; and does my lord think that I dress so badly?

CUTH. (*embracing her*) You! Is there anything you do badly? That dress you have on to-night—it's my favourite too—

EDITH. I put it on for you, this being a special occasion, for good or for ill. That's a thing that's so sweet about you; you notice what one has on. Most men wouldn't.

CUTH. Most men, poor things, haven't wives like mine. Hark! That's the postman's knock, next door. (*going to window L.C.*) Confound him, what is he waiting for? Do we pay him to stand on the doorstep and gossip? Here he comes, here he is. (*goes to door L. and returns to c.*) I'll let the girl bring it in.

EDITH. (*rising and going to CUTHBERT, c., throwing her arms round his neck*) Cuthbert—

CUTH. (*disengaging himself gently*) All right! Don't be afraid, dear If the news is bad I shall stand it. . . . Sit down, Why doesn't that girl bring the letter? (*goes to door L.*) Can't she tear herself from her wretched novelette? Ah, there she goes—at last! She's taken it out. Ah! (*comes c. A knock*) Come in!

A trim little MAID enters L., with a letter on a salver, which she gives to CUTHBERT, who takes it and balances it feverishly in his hands. She turns to EDITH.

MAID: (*up L.C.*) Oh, if you please, m'm—

EDITH. (*pleasantly*) Not now, Mary. To-morrow.

The MAID goes L. CUTHBERT walks to EDITH and gives her the letter.

CUTH. (*c.*) Here, you open it, Edie. Our fate's in there. Let me have it from you.

EDITH opens the envelope; there is a small pencilled note inside; she glances at it and lets her head fall.

CUTH. (*c., drops of perspiration falling down his face*) Edie!

She holds out her hand to him; he strides towards her takes the letter, and reads it.

CUTH. (c., hoarsely) Regrets. . . Pegwell. . .
Ah. . . Oh, all right. I might have known.
(throws letter into fire.)

EDITH. (rising, with outstretched arms) Cuthbert !
CUTH. (impatiently, moving away) All right. . .
(crosses L.) I'm all right. . . It's frightfully hot in here, isn't it ? Do you mind if I open the window ? (he flings the sash open and stands there, his back turned to her.)

EDITH. (c.) You'll catch cold.
CUTH. (closing the window with a bang, and coming down L.) Pegwell ! Of course ! I might have known !

EDITH. (sit c.) Has he any influence ?
CUTH. (sitting L. of c. table) Perhaps. It may be. My luck ! My cursed luck ! It was my last chance. Here am I, with three hundred a year, rising twenty pounds annually till it reaches four hundred and fifty. Eight years—I shall be fifty then. And at sixty they pension me off ; and we spend the rest of our days in some wretched little country cottage. That's our future. (rising) I'm done—finished. (crosses R.C. to stool.)

EDITH. (rises ; goes to him. Gently) You said you'd be brave.

CUTH. (sitting on stool R.C.) One man after the other has passed me, and I started pretty well, too. A clerk in a bank, of course ; but there were opportunities. Now I'm shunted—stuck in a siding for the rest of my life. Edie, you've married an ass, and that's the plain truth of it.

EDITH. (kneeling by him) We know better, you and I.
CUTH. I'm a failure, a rank, rotten failure. Oh, yes, I am ; I know it, and you know it. We used to think—I did, at least—that I was no end of a clever fellow. I had my theories, my ideas—I was going to write a book on banking that was to astonish the world. My dear, that book will never be written.

EDITH. Oh, yes, it will.
CUTH. Never. There's piles and piles of MS. shut up in that drawer ; and you, poor darling, have listened to the dull stuff over and over again. But there's nothing in it. I'm like all dull men—I've a glimmer of an idea, but when I try to express it it eludes me. That's the truth. I fancied myself above the average ; the fact is, I'm below it.

EDITH. (sitting back on floor and pulling him down) I'm

no fool; I've a fairly clear intellect and a fairly sound judgment. I believe in you; I believe in your book; I believe in your future.

CUTH. My future! Ah, Edie, it isn't really favouritism that has put these other men above me, men who are my juniors. It's because they were better men than I. I've known it in my heart a long time. And I'll tell you something else, that I've been ashamed to tell you before. I had a great chance, three years ago. Never mind how, it would take a long time to tell, and it's an intricate matter; but one of our biggest clients was swindling us, and I might have found it out. I didn't. No one could blame me, of course. I had done all my routine work well enough. But there it was.

EDITH. Did anyone else discover it?

CUTH. No, but I might have. It's like the born whist-player, who divines what his partner holds. The bank was let in for a hundred thousand. And the maddening thing is, that I had a vague suspicion. But I just lacked the something—in point of fact, the brain. No one could blame me, everything was right as far as I was concerned, but Fortune had knocked at my door and I wouldn't open. The directors said nothing, of course. What could they say? But that's why I've been passed over, and am passed over to-day. I hoped they'd forgotten; they haven't. There! I've got it off my chest. I shall be a wretched bank clerk for the rest of my days. I've made a hash of my life—and, what's worse, of yours. (*turns to her.*)

EDITH. (*long pause*) Finished?

CUTH. (*is sitting on stool R.C.; smiles*) Yes, I've said my say. Now you know all about it. Now you see what sort of man you've had the bad luck to marry.

EDITH. (*is kneeling on his left. Gently; comedy*) I'm afraid I'm not as sorry for myself as I should be.

CUTH. (*holding her hands*) Ah, of course, you won't admit it. But when I look at you now, why, with all the hard work, and slaving, and the three children, (*taking her face*) you're as pretty to-day as you were when I married you.

EDITH. You dear!

CUTH. You manage to dress on tuppence a year, and look as though you were turned out in Bond-street; you're a splendid musician; you find time to read and to think of what you read; in fact, you a remarkable woman, and you deserved to marry a man who was worthy of you.

EDITH. Like Tom?

CUTH. Why not? Hilda can't hold a candle to you, and her husband has ten thousand a year!

EDITH. A house in Park Lane, a yacht, a motor-car, and a most shocking temper.

CUTH. That's all very well. Edie, Edie, you must have said these things to yourself many a time!

EDITH. Every day after lunch.

CUTH. (*rise and go to fireplace*) You've never murmured, of course, or complained; it's not your way. But that's what galls me. (EDITH rises and stands R.C.) There was the golden chance. I let it go by, Fool! Fool! And you, my poor darling, denied every luxury, every trifle, that sweetens life!

EDITH. You needn't be sorry for me.

CUTH. For whom else? I'm all right. I go out in the morning, come back at night; (*taking her hands*) and there you are, waiting for me, always the same, always with a smile on your lips. But how have you passed the day? The little dinner's ready, as dainty a dinner as a man could desire, but who has cooked it? You. What have you done during those long and tedious hours? You have been with the children, all the time with the children. You have been teaching, dusting, darning, sewing, mending. On whom does the burden of our wretched poverty fall? Not on me. On you.

EDITH. You need not be sorry for me, dear Cuthbert. (*going to table and folding up work*.)

CUTH. Ah, but I am! When I think of your sisters, the lives they lead! When I see other men getting on in the world! And I—what have I done? Nothing!

EDITH. (*sits c.; pause, and going to him R.C.*) You have made a woman love you.

CUTH. (*to her c.*) Oh, and I'm grateful! If I hadn't that! But I've a terrible fear at times that there must be something of pity in that love, Edie, (*a step away R.C.*) something almost of contempt.

EDITH. Cuthbert! pity, contempt! If I had not the deepest respect and admiration for you (*catching his arm*), there could be no love. You mustn't say such things; you mustn't think them, not for an instant. My life is the same as millions of women; but most husbands are satisfied, and say that is all a woman is fit for. (*stop and change*) You have shared every burden of mine, as far as a man could share it, and therefore it has been no burden but only a labour of love. You have given me all that a man can give to his wife except luxury, and that I don't need.

CUTH. (*going to fireplace R.*) Put it as you will, my poor child, it's drudgery all the same, monotonous, incessant drudgery. And why should you be a drudge—You? Why should you have to bear all the labour of the house?

EDITH. (*rise up c. and slowly down L. and to o.*) Ah, the dear little house! I look after it, yes; it's my toy, my plaything. So much of it is the work of my hands and yours! (*down*) There isn't a pretty thing in it that does not stand for happy walks in the evening, when we pondered and hesitated could we afford to buy it, or no. (*sits R. on his L.*) This wall-paper that we put up ourselves, the bookcase, the brackets you carved, the curtains I made—oh, Cuthbert, this house is so intimately of us, so truly our home, that I should have been sorry to leave it! We came here together after our honeymoon; we have lived in it ever since, and I thought we had both been happy—

CUTH. Because of you, always you! Your management, your pinching and scraping, of which I see nothing! Just think (*sitting on stool R., back to audience*) what you might have done with the extra money!

EDITH. It would have been pleasant, of course; but, after all, are we so badly off? We live comfortably, we put a little by every year, we give our mite to the poor. (*rising*) Cuthbert, you have hurt me to-night.

CUTH. (*anxiously, sitting back to audience*) Edie!

EDITH. Yes, you have hurt me. (*sitting; CUTHBERT embraces her*) Why deprecate yourself? That wounds me. What if you do lack the faculty some men possess of making a great deal of money? Is money everything? And shall you hang your head, call yourself a failure, because this appointment has gone to another man?

CUTH. I was his senior, you see. I had a claim.

EDITH. And then? It's for me you are sorry, you say. Do you think I care? (*leaning on his R. shoulder*) When we play our duets together, when we talk of the books we have read, don't you think I value that more than if you made millions, and when you came home could speak of nothing but stocks and shares? Oh, be as ambitious as you like—and you have the power, you can do far more than you think—but within these four walls, in our home, you, husband and father, have achieved a great deal, a very great deal. And you mustn't think otherwise. I will not endure it.

CUTH. Edie!

EDITH. No I will not. (*rising*) Ah, I know Hilda shakes her head, and talks of poor Edie! I never have "a good time," she says. (*sit c.*) A good time! Do I want to invite smart young men to tea, do that dreary daily round of the park, and talk scandal with other women? Do I yearn to play bridge and golf? . . . Don't be sorry for me, Cuthbert.

CUTH. (*to L. of chair c.; sitting on table, leaning over L. of EDIE*) Oh, Hilda's not so far out. Your life is all work, work, work, from morning till night. And what can I do for you?

EDITH. Nothing but love me. (*CUTHBERT takes her hands*) We love each other, you and I. We are not like some husbands and wives, who think a holiday no holiday unless they spend it apart. We don't want to flirt with other men and women. (*pause*) You don't see my wrinkles; you don't notice that my complexion has faded.

CUTH. It hasn't!

EDITH. You see? Your love throws a kind of glamour around me. (*CUTHBERT embraces her*) Nothing in this world gives a woman more happiness than that. You are not only my husband, you are my lover. I look forward to your coming home, night after night, as eagerly as in the first days. You give me the same little attentions and courtesies as when we were engaged. I try to dress prettily to please you: I make my own dresses, and the work is pleasant, because it is done for you. We love each other, and in this great foolish world that is the one thing that counts. Is it not?

CUTH. Yes, yes, my darling, yes! (*comes to L. of table and sits*) But, still, you can't think how glad I should have been to be able to relieve you a little. To give you a little more leisure! Have a nurse, so that at least you might be spared the children about you all day.

EDITH. The children!

CUTH. The appalling weariness of it! From morning till night! Ah, you've said nothing of them!

EDITH. No, I have said nothing of the children, your children and mine, the children you gave me, our three sons. . . . I spend the whole day with them, yes, and day after day. I've no nurse, and desire none. . . . Some women may consider this drudgery. Let them! (*rising*) I am your children's nurse, I am their mother. (*turn away from him and picture it*) When they came into the world they lay on my breast and I fed them. They are mine, all mine (*turn to him*) and yours; no one came between us. And as then I nourished their body, so do I

now feed their heart and brain on all that is best in me. . . . I give what I have. . . . I teach them, they teach me more. . . . I watch their tender minds throw out shoots day after day. I watch them expand, develop. . . . They need me—I'm there, I give. . . . These three sons of ours, yours and mine, shall, God willing, grow into fine, noble men ; and shall I not have done my very good part? Am I to be pitied, do you think, I, who (*up*) make men? (*up*.)

CUTH. (*wonderingly*) Edie !

EDITH. (*raising him and taking him c.*) I, with my husband and children, with my rich full life! (*away from him R.C.*) I, the happiest woman on earth!

CUTH. (*throwing his arms round her and going to her*) Edie, Edie !

EDITH. (*placing her hands on his shoulders*) The happiest woman on earth! Are you not the real husband, the lover, the one man who has made my heart beat? Is your kiss not as sweet to me to-day as it was in our honeymoon? I loved you before our children were born—how much more do I love you now, in them (*pause*) and through them! (*change*) Cuthbert! Cuthbert! Let us never speak of these things again. They are too sacred. You were unhappy; I have let you look into my soul. And, oh, my dear one, let us be content with this great joy of ours, and ask nothing more, (*pause*) lest what we have be taken; and nothing the world has to offer could atone for what we have, we two—our children, our great and wonderful love. . . .

For a moment they stand face to face, looking into each other's eyes; then CUTHBERT kisses her almost reverently on the lips.

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